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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 000085

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AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PASS TO AMCONSUL RECIFE
AMEMBASSY BERLIN PASS TO AMCONSUL DUSSELDORF
AMEMBASSY BERLIN PASS TO AMCONSUL LEIPZIG
AMEMBASSY ATHENS PASS TO AMCONSUL THESSALONIKI

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2020/01/26
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SNAR](#) [CO](#) [VE](#) [KCRM](#)
SUBJECT: CHAVEZ TACKLES RISING CRIME WITH THE BOLIVARIAN NATIONAL
POLICE

REF: CARACAS 1115; 2008 CARACAS 512

CLASSIFIED BY: MEYER, POLCOUNS, DOS, POL; REASON: 1.4(D)

¶1. (C) Summary: On December 20, about 950 members of the newly created "Bolivarian National Police" (PNB) deployed to the streets of Libertador, one of the municipalities of Caracas. President Hugo Chavez had officially inaugurated the PNB in a November 28 speech to PSUV party officials and police cadets in which he called crime "counter-revolutionary" and promised to topple it with the "best police in the world." Differences have already surfaced between the professional force that the Police Training Institute and the PNB Commissioner are trying to build and the revolutionary police Chavez envisions. While the PNB has reported that the murder rate in certain areas declined by 71 percent since the PNB was deployed, the press continues to feature articles implicating the new PNB in old-style abuses. By associating himself so closely with the PNB, Chavez, for the first time, has tied his political fortunes to the public's perception of crime and safety. End Summary.

Crime is a Fifth Column

¶2. (SBU) President Hugo Chavez, backed by a banner reading "Building a Police Everyone Wants," declared crime "a counter-revolutionary fifth column" against Venezuela during a November 28 speech to United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) officials and police cadets. Chavez admitted that crime was "a greater threat to the revolution than expected," but he repeated claims that most of Venezuela's social ills were a spillover from Colombia and accused prior governments of using the police against the people to "protect the interest of the bourgeoisie." Chavez then named a 24 person PSUV Anti-Crime Commission, headed by Chavez loyalist and former mayor of Libertador, Freddy Bernal, to study crime and make policy recommendations.

¶3. (SBU) During the event, Minister of the Interior and Justice Tarek El-Aissami reported that Venezuela had 1.5 police officers per 1,000 residents, far less than the international norm of 3.5 or the ideal of 4.2 officers per 1,000. (Note: U.S. cities average 3.8 per 1,000. End Note.) Chavez immediately interrupted El-Aissami with a back-of-the-envelope calculation concluding, with apparent surprise, that Venezuela had a shortfall of 70,000 police officers. He then tasked PSUV delegates and community councils to identify PNB candidates. He also identified

Luis Ramon Fernandez Delgado, the deputy director and 23-year veteran of CICPC (the FBI equivalent), to be Commissioner General of the PNB and Argenis Gonzalez Gonzalez to be his deputy. Chavez promised the PNB cadets that their salary would be "dignified." (Note: Following the December 5 swearing in of the PNB executive committee, local papers reported that a patrolman's monthly compensation would be BsF 3,100 (approximately USD 1,442 at the then official exchange rate), triple an average patrolman's pay. End Note.)

The New National Police Looks Good on Paper

¶4. (SBU) Dr. Soraya El Achbar, a member of the 2006 Police Reform Commission (CONAREPOL) that recommended the formation of a national police, and currently the Director of the Experimental Training Center for the National Police, described a remarkably professional and apolitical training program. Highly selective, of the 5,220 initial applicants, only 1,061 were expected to graduate in the first PNB cohort. (Note: In September, government press releases were announcing 3,100 new officers in the PNB. End Note.) According to El Achbar, about 48% of applicants had failed psychological pre-screening. An additional 113 were culled during training. El-Achbar displayed remarkable candor identifying the reasons, from simple physical injury to bad conduct, drug use, criminal records and chronic absenteeism. She reviewed a training program that would not have looked out of place in a Western police

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force. Although the center's training cadre included eight Cuban advisors, including Rosa Campoalegre of the Cuban Revolutionary Police, more than 250 other instructors came from diverse inter-disciplinary backgrounds, such as the Central University of Venezuela, Amnesty International and Catholic University Andres Bello.

Tensions and Criticisms Emerge

¶5. (SBU) Despite the enthusiasm for the PNB, there were already suggestions of future problems regarding its political orientation. Chavez immediately followed El-Achbar's comment that "police should not follow any one party" with the jovial retort, "she is referring to the parties who were in power before, not the PSUV." Chavez added, "the National Police needs an ideology, revolutionary and Bolivarian," and praised the cadets for being in the vanguard of a "new, socialist, humanist police." Sociologist Roberto Briceño Leon from the Venezuelan Observatory on Violence later commented, "a socialist police is an institution for only part of society." Rocio San Miguel, of the NGO Citizen's Control, publicly expressed concern that ideology would breed a lack of transparency, a situation that turned the capital city's Metropolitan Police (PM) into a highly corrupt organization.

¶6. (SBU) El-Achbar and Fernandez also disagreed over the relationship between the PNB and local police forces. In a December 6 interview following his swearing in, Fernandez declared that the much reviled Metropolitan Police (PM) "would not operate where the PNB operates," only to have El-Achbar correct him during a December 8 interview when she stated "the PNB is not the substitute for municipal or state police," the position contained in the PNB's official mission statement.

PNB In The Field

¶7. (SBU) PNB debuted 947 officers on December 20 in the Sucre precinct, in the western Caracas municipality of Libertador. Libertador is the remaining Chavista base in greater Caracas following the 2008 municipal elections. Sucre has a population of almost 400,000 persons in an area of 59 Km2, making it an ideal police laboratory for the untested PNB. In the three weeks since being introduced to the public, another 114 cadets had been found to have criminal records. El-Achbar told the press, "we don't need more corrupt police." Although the PNB have 15 areas of competency, this deployment will concentrate on only five - patrolling, community policing, criminal investigation, drug investigations and receiving crime reports. The hasty deployment resulted in only 500 officers being issued service pistols; some of the planned precinct offices even lacked working toilets.

¶8. (SBU) Despite these limitations, government media claimed that successes ranging from a 71% reduction of homicides in certain sectors over the previous year to the seizure of 604 cases of beer were attributable to the PNB. However, media also reported on January 5 that a PNB officer had been implicated in the December 29 massacre of five people.

More Than Cops On the Beat

¶9. (SBU) During the December 5 address, El-Achbar also described how the resources of the municipal and central government would be brought to bear in this effort. Satellite courts, social services and public defenders offices would be established in Sucre to speed up Venezuela's chronically slow legal process. Similar to

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the New York City "Broken Windows" strategy, the Libertador mayor's office is creating a special office to respond to social issues, such as no street lights or dilapidated recreation facilities that influence criminal behavior.

¶10. (C) Comment: The law authorizing the PNB was considered idealistic when it was passed in April 2008 (ref b). As predicted, its implementation has been slow. Tensions between professionalism and partisanship and between local and national police are already developing. While polls have shown that crime is a top concern of Venezuelans, polls have also indicated that few have blamed Chavez for what is considered a long-standing social scourge. However, by taking on the issue of crime and identifying himself the new police corps, Chavez may be tying his political fortunes to the public's perception of safety on Caracas' mean streets. End Comment.

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